



THE PROBLEM OF LAND ADJUSTMENT IN THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIANS

A radio talk by Paul W. Wager, Assistant Director, Region 4, Program Planning Division, AAA, broadcast in the Conservation Day program, National Farm and Home Hour, Friday, June 28, 1935, by 62 radio stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

There is perhaps no region in the United States where more people are economically stranded because of an unrestrained exploitation of land resources than in the Southern Appalachians. Defining the region in its most restricted sense, this is an area of 55,000,000 acres lying in six States.

Racially the people of the region are predominantly Scotch-Irish. After the middle of the eighteenth century there was a steady stream of migration southwestward from Pennsylvania and Virginia, and as soon as the Shenandoah, the Yadkin, and the Catawba valleys filled up, those hardy landseekers pushed on beyond the Blue Ridge. The beauty and grandeur of the country, the magnificent stands of timber, and the fertility of such valleys as the French Broad, the Watauga, and the Holston lured great numbers into the region despite its isolation. In subsequent years as the slavery agitation became more acute, the population was swollen by non-slaveholding families from the lower Piedmont country.

All in all the people attracted to the Appalachian Highlands were hardy, independent, and self-reliant, with a strong tradition for civil and religious freedom. With practically no negroes and no infiltration of foreign born, this stock remains the purest Anglo-Saxon on the American continent. Moreover, until penetrated by good roads within the last two decades, the region has seen the perpetuation of an eighteenth century civilization--the little farms being almost completely self-contained. The spinning wheel, the loom, the quilting frame, the pewter dishes, the big iron kettle, are still in common household use. Grain is still cut with a scythe, the farmer still carries his corn to the local grist mill on mule back. The hogs and cattle still run at large.

The romanticist deplores the penetration of the last frontier, the obliteration of this simple, picturesque, self-contained economy. He would like to be able to turn off a twentieth century highway and observe an eighteenth century civilization. He is inclined to overlook the fact that culture is a product of an economic condition, and that people do not maintain a way of life merely for his amusement or delight.

The self-sufficing economy of the Southern Appalachians has been perpetuated partly because of isolation, but also because of the presence of the resources on which it was based. The picturesque civilization which is so appealing cannot be perpetuated without the timber, the soil, the fish, the game on which it has been sustained. These resources are now seriously depleted.

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The original economy, and the natural and proper economy, of the Southern Highlands is a small tract of good soil--a subsistence homestead if you please--surrounded and buttressed by a reservoir of forest wealth--timber, fish, and game.

These highland people have never secured their living primarily from agriculture. The land has furnished them most of their food supply, but the forest has provided them their cash income. But the increasing demands for cash on the part of the small owners, and the temptation to liquidate rapidly on the part of the big owners, have resulted in the exhaustion of the timber in many areas. Some extensive areas have been completely devastated by wanton and ruthless cutting followed by fires. Thus the supplementary income so essential to subsistence farmers has been lost.

But this is only part of the distressing picture. The subdivision of the land holdings because of increased population has led to the successive clearing of steeper and poorer land. The corn patches have appeared higher and higher up the mountain side. As soon as these steep slopes are put under cultivation, erosion begins and after three or four years these fields have to be abandoned because of depleted fertility. The washing away of the top soil not only leaves the uplands unproductive, but the deposit of silt chokes up the streams, raising the water level and thereby reducing the area and productiveness of the bottom lands. Moreover, the silting of the streams and the removal of forest cover destroys the habitat and slows up the propagation of fish and game. Finally, the depletion of the natural resources has led to the abandonment of such industries as once existed, to a decline in taxable wealth, and to a steady termination of the various avenues of employment. Abandoned mines, abandoned railroads, ghost towns, add gloom to the already desolate countryside.

Had the population drifted out too, the situation would not be so distressing. It is true there was some exodus of the surplus population in the pre-depression years. Young men were drawn to Cleveland, Detroit, and other industrial centers. But thousands of them have now drifted back to their native hills. The result is that in some countries half the population is now on relief.

It is conservative to state that there are three times as many people in the Southern Appalachians as the present resources will support. These resources must be renewed. Fortunately they can be renewed, but it is a slow process and one that will not be undertaken in any large way by private enterprise. It is accepted national policy that a considerable portion of the forest land should be in public ownership, and the U.S. Forest Service has already acquired several million acres. Some was acquired several years ago, and hills once burnt and brown are now verdant again. Streams that were sluggish and dirty are beginning to run clear again.

But it will be years before the forests alone can support even half the present population. The fertile bottom lands must be reclaimed and intensively cultivated.

By concentrating settlement in and limiting cultivation to the valleys and the richer coves, it will be possible to check the wastage of soil fertility and the silting of streams, and at the same time provide the people with minimum social services. A limited acreage of good land will provide them abundant foodstuffs, and part-time employment will yield them sufficient cash to enjoy a few of the comforts and services of modern times. It would be unfortunate if their way of life became too commercialized. But the simplicity of the self-sufficing mountain farm can be preserved without subjecting the people to the privations which they now suffer. They don't need automobiles; neither can they afford them. But no people in America need be located in such isolated spots that their children are denied schools and medical attention. The southern mountains have been and should remain the source of a steady stream of clean, strong youth renewing and strengthening our national population.

We cannot hope to rehabilitate all the people now living in the Southern Appalachians where they are--perhaps not half of them--but to the extent that the renovating and development work that needs to be done on the land can be made available as part-time employment to the people now living there, it will be possible to rehabilitate both people and resources at the same time. To effect the adjustments in land use and the changes in population distribution that will lead to the realization of this goal is one of the most constructive and interesting tasks that face the resettlement administration.

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